

CHARLES DICKENS' READINGS.

Mr. Edmund Yates, the novelist and dramatist, contributes the following article to *Tinsley's Magazine*—

Nearly eleven years have passed since Mr. Charles Dickens commenced his career as a professional "reader." He had read the "Christmas Carol" and the "Gleanings" before public audiences on several occasions, but always in aid of the funds of some charitable institution. It was not until the evening of Thursday, the 29th of April, 1858, that he appeared in St. Martin's Hall (now converted into the New Queen's Theatre) to give a reading for his own benefit. This reading Mr. Dickens prefaced with a little speech explanatory of his reasons for appearing in public, which, now that he is about to bring those peculiar appearances to a close, will possess peculiar interest. He said:—"Ladies and Gentlemen!—It may perhaps be known to you that, for a few years past, I have been accustomed occasionally to read some of my shorter books, to various audiences, in aid of a variety of good objects, and at some charge to myself both in time and money. It having at length become impossible in any reason to comply with these always accumulating demands, I have had definitely to choose between now and then reading on my own account, as one of my recognized occupations, or not reading at all. I have had no difficulty in deciding on the former course. "The reasons that have led me to it—besides the consideration that it necessitates no departure whatever from the chosen pursuits of my life—are three-fold:—Firstly, I have satisfied myself that it can involve no possible compromise of the credit and independence of literature; secondly, I have long held the opinion, and have long acted on the opinion, that in these times whatever brings a public man and his public face to face, on terms of mutual confidence and respect, is a good thing; thirdly, I have had a pretty large experience of the interest my hearers are so generous as to take in these occasions, and of the delight they give to me, as a tried means of strengthening those relations—I may almost say of personal friendship—which it is my great privilege and pride, as it is my great responsibility, to hold with a multitude of persons who will never hear my voice nor see my face. Thus it is that I come, quite naturally, to be here among you at this time, and thus it is that I proceed to read this little book, quite as composedly as I might proceed to write it, or to publish it in any other way."

Since then, as is well known, Mr. Dickens has frequently given readings from several of his works in London, in the principal towns of England, Ireland, and Scotland, and in the United States. At many of these readings, given before all sorts and conditions of men, I have been present, chiefly for the purpose of watching the effect produced by the reader upon his audience. The result has been to confirm me in a long-entrenched and henceforth never-to-be-shaken belief, that let him treat what subject he chooses, show people what they actually are or what they really ought to be, appeal to their human sympathies or their higher aspirations, their great and God-gifted genius holds the hearts of his audience in his hands, now moving them to laughter, now melting them into tears, but invariably concentrating their attention, even upon an infliction of his voice, and creating in all, even the most hardened and battered in the hourly skirmishes of this wretched world, a proud, honest, hearty, human sympathy.

But although amongst his friends and such of the outside world as had been admitted to the private performances of the Tavistock House theatricals Mr. Dickens was known to possess much dramatic power, it was not until within the last few weeks that he found scope for his exhibition on the platform. Although the characters in his previous readings had each a distinct and defined individuality—and in true artistic spirit the comparatively insignificant characters had as much finish bestowed upon their representation as the heroes and heroines, e. g., the fat man on "Change who replies "God knows," to the query as to whom Scrooge had left his money—a bit of perfect Dutch painting—one could not help remarking that it was not as if Mr. Dickens' reading given under restraint; that the reader was "under-acting" as it is professionally termed, and one longed to see him give his dramatic genius full vent. That wish has now been realized. When Mr. Dickens called round him some half-hundred of his friends and acquaintances on whose discrimination and knowledge of public audiences he had reliance, and when, after requesting their frank verdict on the experiment, he commenced the new reading, "Sikes and Nancy," until, gradually warming with excitement, he lunged aside his book and acted the scene of the murder, shrieked the terrified pleadings of the girl, growled the brutal savagery of the murderer, brought looks, tones, gestures simultaneously into play to illustrate his meaning, there was no one, not even of those who had known him best or who believed in him most, but was astonished at the power and the versatility of his genius.

Gratified as the characters stands out *Fagin*, the Jew. Of late years a plague of Jews has fallen upon the London stage. Comic Jews—the base of the appreciative, the delight of the chuckle-headed, amongst the audience. First in date and in excellence was "Melter Moss," in the drama of the *Ticket of Leave*, originally played by Mr. George Vincent, with great humor and appreciation of character; and subsequently degraded by the same actor, under the patronage of gallery guffaws, into a senseless buffoon. "Melter Moss" was soon had diluted version of him in a play called *The Great City*. This misrepresentative of the Hebrew race was remarkable for nothing save his dissimilarity to any previously seen specimen of the Jewish nation. His study of character had apparently induced him to believe that the assumption of a palpably false pasteboard nose, and the occasional utterance of the asseveration, "Sheep me!" would carry him through. His imbecility was his safeguard; had he been more forcible, he would have been intolerable.

There is still a Jew "of the theatre" on the London stage; Mr. Dominick Murray, an actor of great original talent, sometimes, as in his performance of "Michael Feeny," rising into genuine, playing a Jew money-lender and bell-keeper in *After Dark*, and playing it well, as he could not fail to do, though the part is scarcely suited to him. "Fagin," as shown by Mr. Dickens, is very different from any of these. There is nothing comic about him, there is nothing grand or tragic, as in "Shylock" he is a cork-stick, the conventional and revengeful; and Mr. Dickens shows him to you in every phase. You read it in his rounded shoulders, in his sunken chin, in his puckered cheeks and hanging brow, in his gleaming eyes and quivering, clinking bands, in the little shiftness of his movements, and the intense earnestness of his attitudes. The voice is husky and with a slight lisp, but there is no nasal intonation; a bent back, but no shuffling gait; the conventional attributes are omitted, the conventional words are never spoken, and the Jew face, crafty

and cunning even in his bitter vengeance, is there before us to the life.

Next comes Nancy. Readers of the old editions of *Oliver Twist* will doubtless recollect how deeply agonized it was to fight against the dreadful impression which Mr. George Cruikshank's picture of Nancy left upon the mind, and how it required all the assistance of the author's genius to preserve interest in the stunted, squab, round-faced trull whom the artist had depicted.

Accurately delineating every other character in the book, and excelling all his previous and subsequent productions in his etching of "Fagin in the Condemned Cell," Mr. Cruikshank not merely did not convey the right idea of Nancy, which would have been bad enough, but conveyed the wrong one, which was worse. No such ill-favored girl would have found a protector in Sikes, who amongst his set and in his profession was a man of mark. We all know Nancy's position; but just because we know it, we are certain she must have had some amount of personal comeliness, which Mr. Cruikshank has entirely denied her. In the reading we got none of the common side of her character, which peeps forth occasionally in the earlier volumes. She is the heroine, doing evil that good may come of it, breaking the trust reposed in her that the man she loves and they amongst whom she has lived may be brought to better lives. With the dread shadow of impending death upon her, she is thrillingly earnest, almost prophetic. Thus, in accordance with a favorite custom of the author, during the interview on the steps at London bridge, not only does she give the girl's life, but she also gives the life of every-day life and home imbued with dramatic tragedy and fervor, but that eminently prosaic old person, Mr. Brownlow, becomes affected in the same manner, saying, "before this river wakes to life," and indulging in other romantic types and metaphors. This may be scarcely life-like, but it is very effective in the reading, enchainning the attention of the audience and forming a line contrast to the simple pathos of the dialogue in the murder-scene, every word of which is in the highest degree natural and well-placed. It is here, of course, that the extent of the audience is brought to its highest pitch, and that the acts of the actor's art is reached. The raised hands, the bent-back head, are good; but shut your eyes, and the illusion is more complete. Then the cries for mercy, the "Bill! dear Bill! for dear God's sake!" uttered in tones in which the agony of fear prevails even over the earnestness of the prayer, the dead, dull voice as hope departs, are intensely real. When the pleading ceases, you open your eyes in relief, in time to see the impersonation of the murderer seizing a heavy club, and striking his victim to the ground.

I would have the reading end here. I would have the curtain descend, as it were, upon that deed of blood. I would have no more of "Sikes," nothing of the pleasant humor of "Mrs. Gamp." I know that the British public likes to see justice overtaking the wicked. I have been warned scores of times by kind friends, known and unknown, that people delight in a happy ending; to books and plays, and I am yet of the old-fashioned opinion that the artist should not cater to the taste of his public, and I feel certain that, artificially speaking, the story of "Sikes" and "Nancy" ends at the point I have indicated. At the private reading opinions differed as to this. On the first public reading I heard no discussion; but I am convinced that I am rightly interpreting the feelings of the majority of the audience. There is always less shouting of feet, coughing, etc., at Mr. Dickens' readings than at any other public entertainment. Throughout the entire scene of the murder, from the entrance of "Sikes" into the house until the catastrophe, the silence was intense; the old phrase "a pin might have been heard to drop," might have been legitimately employed. It was a great study to watch the faces of the people—eager, excited, intent—permitted for once in a lifetime to be natural, forgetting to be British, and critical and uncomplaisant. The great strength of this feeling did not last into the concluding five minutes. The people were earnest and attentive; but the wit excitement so seldom seen amongst us died as "Nancy" died, and the rest was somewhat of an anticlimax.

No one who appreciates great acting should miss this scene. It will be a treat such as they have not had for a long time, such as, from all appearances, they are not likely to have soon again. To them the earnestness and force of the delivery, the accents, the delicate lights and shades of the great dramatic art, will be exhibited by one of the first, if not the first, of its living masters; while those of far less intellectual calibre will understand the vigor of the entire performance; and be especially amused at the facial and vocal dexterity by which the crafty "Fagin" is instantaneously changed into the chuckle-headed "Noah Claypole."

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